UNITED
NATIONS

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Security Council

Distr.
GENERAL

S/25519
3 April 1993

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

LETTER DATED 2 APRIL 1993 FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to convey to you, for the information of the members of the Security Council, a letter which the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees addressed to the Secretary-General this evening. It describes the disturbing situation which has developed in Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia following the decision of the Bosnian Serb military authorities not to permit any further aid to be delivered to that town.

The Force Commander of UNPROFOR has been instructed this evening to take this matter up immediately with the Bosnian Serb leadership and, in the Secretary-General's name, to insist that UNHCR be permitted to resume delivery of aid to Srebrenica. The results of General Wahlgren's démarche will be communicated to you as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the members of the Security Council may wish to consider what supportive action they might take in this extremely worrying situation.

(Signed) Boutros BOUTROS-GHALI

Annex

Letter dated 2 April 1993 from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees addressed to the Secretary-General

Further to my letter of 18 March 1993, I would like to draw your attention to the extremely dramatic plight of the people in Srebrenica.

The population of Srebrenica town has swollen from 6,000 persons to 20-30,000 persons, with another 30,000 persons in the surrounding area. Despite the recent cease-fire and the airdrops, the humanitarian situation continues to be dire, and worsening by the hour. People are in desperate need of food, medicine, clothes and shelter material. Many of them are living on the streets, without any shelter or adequate clothing, exposed to winter conditions. You have already received the report from WHO on the very precarious health situation in Srebrenica. Most of the population is suffering from skin disease, many people have respiratory and intestinal infections. There are thousands of women and children who are weak, exhausted and starving.

Even under normal circumstances the infrastructure of Srebrenica could not support its current population, more than 75 per cent of whom are refugees from other areas in eastern Bosnia. Many of these refugees have had to flee several times from advancing Bosnian Serb forces. It is their conviction that the Bosnian Serbs will pursue their military objective to gain control of Srebrenica, and that the cease-fire will not hold. They are desperate to escape to safety because they see no other prospect than death if they remain where they are. Recent reports indicate that thousands of people have already begun to move towards Zepa under extremely dangerous conditions.

Only three UNHCR aid convoys have been able to reach the besieged town of Srebrenica in the past fortnight (on 19, 28 and 30 March). We were allowed by the Serbs to bring in food and medicine but not shelter material. The departing trucks were forced to evacuate over 5,560 women, children and elderly to Tuzla, as well as several hundred wounded persons.

Our efforts have met with serious difficulties. Firstly, despite measures taken by the local authorities to contain the situation, our convoys were stampeded by people desperate to flee Srebrenica by any means. In that process, several people were crushed to death. We ended up transporting a far larger number of people than planned. Secondly, despite the desperation of the people to leave, the Bosnian authorities in Tuzla as well as in Srebrenica are opposed to continued evacuation of people, which they see as designed to empty the town of its women and children in order to facilitate a subsequent Serbian offensive. Also the existing facilities in Tuzla are inadequate to absorb the new arrivals. Thirdly, yesterday we were informed by General Mladic of the Bosnian Serb military that he would not permit any more aid to be brought into Srebrenica, but would allow UNHCR to continue the evacuation only. This is unacceptable and contradicts his earlier assurances to UNHCR and UNPROFOR to allow access to humanitarian aid. My Special Envoy for the former Yugoslavia is pursuing negotiations on this matter.

UNHCR had planned to send another convoy to Srebrenica today, but because of delays at the border crossing-point, it has been postponed until tomorrow. Even if the convoy is able to bring some aid and can evacuate some people without untoward incidents, we are forced to acknowledge that the current efforts are totally inadequate to address the increasing human suffering.

Under these circumstances, I believe we are faced with two options, if we are to save the lives of the people trapped in Srebrenica. The first is to immediately enhance international presence, including that of UNPROFOR, in order to turn the enclave into an area protected by the United Nations, and inject life-sustaining assistance on a scale much greater than being permitted at the moment. Such an option would require the strongest political pressure from the international community on the Serbian side. Failing that, the only other option would be to organize a large-scale evacuation of the endangered population in Srebrenica. This would require the cooperation of all parties concerned, in particular that of the Bosnian authorities, as well as massive operational support to UNHCR to ensure that the evacuation can be conducted in a manner in which it does not endanger the very lives of those it is meant to save.

As time is running out, more drastic action needs to be taken urgently to ensure the survival of the population in Srebrenica. This cannot be achieved under the current conditions which do not allow UNHCR to do more than send in a very limited number of convoys which are neither adequate in meeting the humanitarian needs of the people nor in evacuating all those who wish to leave.

While I have instructed my Special Envoy to make every effort to increase our operational capacity to aid the population in Srebrenica, I wish to solicit your strong support to draw the attention of the international community, including the Security Council, to the help needed to carry out the essential measures. May I also seek your advice on what further steps can be taken to address this humanitarian tragedy in eastern Bosnia?

(Signed) Sadako OGATA